

THE

CHANGES

EPHRAIM;

OR THE

BACKSLIDERS WARNING.

The Backslider in Heart shall be filled with his own
Way.

PROV. xiv. 14.

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T H E
BACKSLIDERS WARNING.

PROV. xiv. 14. *The Backsliding in Heart
shall be filled with his own Way.*

OF all the threatnings denounced in scripture against backsliding, I know of none more terrible than this; this, which shews us, that the Almighty has ways and means sufficient, in his own hand, awfully to correct, and punish the backslidings of his people, consistently with his indissoluble relation to them as their Father who is in heaven. The many ways in which he manifesteth his paternal displeasure are all to be dreaded; but none so much as his leaving us to choose our own way, till we are glutted with our choice. If sin is visited with a rod, and our transgressions with the stripes of the children of men, it will undoubtedly bring poignant grief and heart-wringing anguish upon us; yet exceedingly inferior to that most awful punishment of heart-backslidings denounced in the text.

Backsliding in heart, necessarily supposeth an antecedent rectitude of principle, and a cleaving to the Lord, with sincerity and ardour; therefore is inapplicable to

4 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

those who had put on only an outward profession, and for a time followed the form of religion, either with some sinister view, or from an heated imagination. None can be said to backslide in heart, but those whose hearts have followed after Jesus; but those swine and dogs that returned to their mire and vomit, never adhered to the Lord with their hearts, notwithstanding for a season they associated with his people. The words can therefore be applied only to the subjects of faith, who, being bewitched with the idols of earth, draw back from their simplicity; by a deceived heart being turned aside from the corn of Paradise, to feed upon sordid ashes; forsaking the pure streams of the river of God, drink of the polluted waters of *Abana* and *Parphar*; flee down to Egypt for help and refuge, and trust not in the Lord in the day of their trouble.

A man may be a backslider in heart, even when he cannot be charged with any open notorious sin; for it is possible that a thousand things may draw away the heart and affections from God, when there is nothing in the natural constitution that violently inclines unto any evil usually deemed enormous. This backsliding of heart, is at least equally dangerous with that, where the constitutional propensities to

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the greatest evils are strong, and overcome the feeble efforts of the mind in resistance; as it is more difficult to fasten conviction of heart-backsliding upon the sober man, than upon the notorious offender. Besides, it renders a person equally useless, altho' not quite so burthensome to a church; for the service of which he has neither hand nor inclination; so that at best he is but a barren fig-tree in the garden of our God. What listlessness to, what deadness in duty, what formality, what hypocrisy may be discovered, where there is in reality nothing chargeable upon the moral conduct? And consequently, how little of the spirit and power of religion may in such a case be experienced.

A man may, through the violence of temptation, the strength of corruption, or unhappy opportunity serving to the occasion, be precipitated into the most loathsome and notorious evils, without commencing backsliding in heart. This I think is apparent from the case of Noah, who, on a day of festivity, drank himself drunk, and yet, of his heart-backsliding, we have nothing upon record. This was also the case of righteous Lot; he was ensnared by the subtilty of his daughters, and though chargeable with both drunkenness and incest, is not reproved as a back-

6 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

slider in heart. And surely Peter was no backslider in heart, even when he denied his master, as is clear from his professed regard to him on all other occasions. Heart-backsliding is less rapid in its progress, invades the misled believer by slow degrees, and is long before it arrives at its state. That covetous disposition, which drew Demas away from Paul the apostle, was in all probability rankling in his bosom, and as a gangrene eating up the vitals of religion in his soul, long before it separated him from the way of truth. Nothing can be more natural, than for the person openly to backslide from God and his ways, whose heart and affections have been so long departed into the world.

Sacred history does not, that I know of, furnish any instance so suitable for the illustration of the awful proposition recorded in the text, as its account of Ephraim. In him we may trace the believer in the warmth of espousal love; in all the stages of heart-backsliding, till even surfeited with his own ways; as well as in the humbled state of restoration to his God and Saviour. I shall therefore illustrate the point from the general history of that character, as recorded by the pen of infallibility.

I. Ephraim is a fit type of the believer in the warmth of his espousal love, for he

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was not always a froward and rebellious child any more than my *reader*. He had formerly his season of love and enjoyment, a season of walking and following God in his appointed ways, a season of teaching, leading, drawing, and special liberty. Yet Ephraim became a backslider in heart, and a rebel in his conversation.

I, saith the Lord, taught Ephraim to go, taking him by the arms, “* As if he had said, I shewed unto Ephraim his sore, his foul disease; I caused him to apprehend his danger on account of his sinfulness; I set the emptiness of all times enjoyments before him, and taught him to go from the tents of sin, and paths of error, to Jesus, for pardon, acceptance, and salvation. I taught him to go in the path of duty, and held his arm in the way of obedience: I led him up to my sanctuary, and caused him to delight in the place where mine honour dwelleth. I was to them as they that take off the yoke†. Such was the deliverance I wrought for him, and so far did my deliverance exceed his highest expectations. When he stood shivering in his chains at the very brink of destruction, I set an open door of hope in his view, put songs of deliverance into his mouth, and made him glad through my salvation. I

* Hos. xi. 3.

† Hos. xi. 4.

8 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

drew him with cords of a man, and bands of love*, and all my ways were pleasantness, and my paths felicity to him. How answerable is this to the young convert, whose paths are strowed with sweetest flowers, and whose feet delight to move in swift obedience. What genial, what halcyon days, are the days of espousal love? Then can we follow the Lord with delight, even in the wilderness, in a land that is not sown; for all his paths drop fatness, and the wilderness itself is to the soul as a fruitful field and a land that is blessed. How precious is the word? How delightful are his ordinances? How desireable is the house of prayer? Tell the young convert, that even he may yet become a backslider in heart, wilfully dishonour his God, and crucify afresh his Saviour. He will answer.

O never, never, whilst my life endures,
Will I forsake my loving Lord! Despise
That precious blood which all my evil cures;
That dearest love which wipes my weeping
eyes.

Draw back they may who never knew his love,
Cast off his sway who never felt his grace;
My soul rejects earth's pomp, and dwells above;

My heart delights to gaze on Jesus' face. Yet,

* Hof. xi. 4.

II. We have Ephraim to trace in all the stages of heart-backsliding. The first stage of which is a *divided heart* *, which is an offence to the Almighty. A man cannot at once give up communion with God; at once return to the embrace of abhorred idols. But by degrees he may be brought to that, which at first would make his very flesh to shudder, and his soul to stand aghast. Whatever advances a backslider in heart may make in departure from God, they all begin with a division in the heart and affections. One part of his heart must as yet be held sacred to the Redeemer, but this is thought to justify the devoting of the other part to idols; by which I mean every thing that tends to draw off the heart from Emanuel. Now the unhappy man, having his heart in part at the idol's shrine, of course a moiety of his time must be spent in the idol's temple; and thus, if grace prevents not, he will go on till he become like Ephraim, as a cake not turned †, neither baked nor unbaked; not properly a Christian, nor yet altogether profane; not fit, strictly speaking, either for God or the Devil, for the church or the world.

2. But here he stops not. The divided heart dwindles into an empty vine ‡, where

* Hof. x. 2. † Hof. vii. 8. ‡ Hof. x. 1.

there

10 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

there may be verdure and plenty of foliage, as with the fig-tree cursed by the blessed Jesus. By its appearance, at a distance, it promised fruit, but upon examination, none was to be found on its branches. A person may have made great advances in heart-backsliding, yet keep up a profession of religion, and frequent the place where prayer is wont to be made; as backsliding may be supposed to be drawing towards its state or crisis, when it comes to a neglect of the stated opportunities of hearing the word and prayer. But all the external duties of religion, performed without the heart, are only as so many leaves upon a fruitless and barren vine. In such a case there is no advantage to be derived from that professor; he will even glory in giving a church *no trouble*. Nevertheless he is a troubler in Israel, seeing he withholds from the community, that which he ought to supply as a joint of the common body. A withered member must necessarily be burdensome to the body which carries it; and such are all, in church relation, who study not usefulness in their proper sphere. An empty vine is a nuisance in the vineyard, and therefore it is said, "cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" It naturally tends to prevent the sun

sun beams nourishing those which grow in its neighbourhood.

3. But let a professor once dwindle into an *empty vine*, and it is much if he makes no further advances in heart-backsliding. Hence we read next of Ephraim, that, "*he hath mixed himself with idols* *," or with idol-worshippers; professed worldlings, known to be destitute of the fear and love of God. When a Christian can once relish, and prefer the company and conversation of the ungodly without remorse and woundings of heart, it is a proof that the leprosy has eaten deep into the walls, and that he is become *obstinate* in his error. The most awful consequences may now be apprehended. We shall scarcely conceive worse than are likely to be the issue, seeing, without a miracle, such a person will not be reclaimed, without being left to fill himself with his own ways, and to have enough of idols, and idol-worshippers, like Ephraim. I might largely shew the evils of this conduct, but as I study brevity, and shall therefore consider Ephraim in the

4. Stage of heart-backsliding, which is *self-conceit*; for if he has any fits of goodness now, tho' but as the morning cloud which passeth away, those fits shall be employed in the niceties of meer speculation, instead of

* Hof. vii. 8.

12 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

substantial religion. For as the power of vital religion declines, it is possible that knowledge of metaphysical and scholastic divinity may increase; and even when the soul gets lean and barren, he may say, with Ephraim *, “ yet I am become rich, I have gotten me substance;” or, like those in the Revelation, who said, “ we are rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.” So that from the gingle of meer speculations, the very backslider in heart may become like a fair heifer, which loveth to tread out the corn †, and judge himself most fit both to teach and govern. For as nearness to God lays the creature low in the very dust of abasement, and pours a becoming contempt on all creature endowments, backsliding, or distance from him, naturally tends to diminish the riches of mercy, and veil the glories of infinite grace; and in an equal proportion magnifies every thing human and creaturely. So that in a state of backsliding, the eyes are gradually shut to our own nothingness, and keen to point out every personal attainment; and we may lay it down as an invariable maxim, that a growing opinion of our own importance and attainments, is an infallible sign of a backsliding-heart.

* Hof. xii. 8. † Hof. x. 11.

But

The BACKSLIDERS WARNING. 13

But this is not the full end of the backslider's way ; for now,

Fifthly, We shall find him with Ephraim making altars to sin * ; perhaps, indeed, but few in number, and that privately too at first ; but the beginnings of a sinful course is as the letting in of water, which may be in drops only, and yet end in an inundation or overflowing flood. Having begun with making only a private altar to one sin, the backslider in heart will not stop till, if permitted, he hath made altars to many sins ; and lick up the filthy vomit, which once was his utter loathing and abhorrence. Wound religion, grieve the spirit and people of God, and put the Lord that bought him to open shame ; having his *root dried* †, and, in appearance, as if he had never known the power of the Redeemer's resurrection, nor the fellowship of his sufferings. Yet still the backslider in heart may strive to support his sinking credit, as a professor, and like Ephraim, his type, may squander his substance in bribing the good opinion of his dependants, or, as the prophet expresseth it, *in hiring lovers* ‡. But in this his success shall be but small, for it is the divine determination, that rebellious Ephraim shall be covered with shame ; that his glory shall flee

* Hos. viii. 11. † Hos. ix. 16. ‡ Hos. viii. 9.

14 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

away as a bird, and that the backslider in heart shall be filled with his own way.

Sixthly, Ephraim is now like a wild ass's colt in the wilderness, snuffing up the wind, and following the east wind * : and as soon may the ass fill his belly with the east wind, as *Ephraim*, or our heart-backslider, satisfy himself with his idols and vanities; let the prodigal desire ever so ardently to fill his belly with the husks which swine eat, he shall find that no man giveth unto him; and that, unless he himself were a swine, he cannot be satisfied with swinish sustenance. To be thus turned aside from the straight and narrow way; to feed upon ashes, or to desire the husks which swine eat whilst there is bread enough in our father's house, and to spare, whilst even his hired servants live in plenty, is a case most deplorable, and argues a most awful state of declension. O my reader, when your heart but begins to hanker after the world, in any of its modes, and to take up its rest in the enjoyments of time, you have need to be upon your guard against its farther departure from God. For the heart once entered into the paths of backsliding, will never of itself stop, till it is quite filled with its own way, and tired out with idols of its own formation.

* *Hos. xii. 1.*

Seventhly,

Seventhly, Another aggravation still is found to attend heart-backsliding, as in the case of Ephraim, and that is, dealing deceitfully with God. "Ephraim compasseth me about with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit.*" And amongst dull and formal professors, especially with backsliders in heart, there is much more of this than at first view may be apprehended. All worship in which the heart is not fully engaged is but lying worship; and all such praises as proceed not from a spirit of gratitude are but praises of deceit. Therefore the same charge may as well be brought against us, as against Ephraim; when Hosannah's languish on our tongue, and our devotion dies upon our lips; when our worship is formal and without the heart; which is, which must be case when the heart is, by the attraction of any object whatever, withdrawn from God our chief, our superlative good. On account of all these things it is said†, "*Ephraim hath provoked him (God) most bitterly; therefore shall he leave his blood upon him: and his reproach shall his Lord return upon him.*" From whence it is clear that God, (speaking after the manner of man) may be most bitterly provoked, and resolve to punish the backslider in heart, even when he cannot give him up

* Hof. xi. 12. † Hof. xii. 14.

16 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

to final ruin; even when he owns the filial relation still to subsist. The departure of the prodigal from his father's house; the rebellions of froward and stubborn Ephraim, did not cut off their title to sonship, did not cause the father to disinherit the one or the other. This leads me,

III. To take a brief survey of the conduct of God, in case of heart backsliding, as it is discovered in the account of Ephraim; and we find it to be in all respects becoming the divine character; becoming God, who can make no allowance for sin, and who, notwithstanding, loves his people with an unalterable regard.

1. Heart-backslidings may be long hid from the view of man, and may be of such a nature, that they cannot become matters of church examination; for whilst Ephraim can say, "In all my labours they shall find no iniquity in me, that were sin*"; he has those at defiance who reprove in the gate, and may account himself still to be a very respectable member of Christian society. But Ephraim's iniquity, how private soever, heart-backslidings, be they ever so secret, are all naked and open to the believer's God; are all perfectly known to him with whom we have to do. For his eyes see the very thoughts, purposes, and

* Hof. xii. 8.

intents of the heart ; his eye-lids try every action, which lies hid from his churches, and he knows how to bring every secret work into open light, and to publish upon the house-top that which is done under cover of the sable gloom of midnight. Therefore he declares, that *Ephraim the heart-backslider shall receive shame**, shall be compassed about by the iniquity of his heels, and be found out by his many revoltings. As his iniquity is known unto God, he certainly will make it known unto others ; so that shame shall cover the countenance of heart-backsliders. It is from this, that I account for the secret sins of the Lord's own people, having frequently been brought to light in a manner to us otherwise unaccountable ; and indeed it is a privilege to backsliding believers, that the Lord does thus set their secret sins in the light of his countenance, seeing it is for their recovery, and not for their final ruin. And hence too it is, that private backslidings are frequently punished by notorious falls, and grievous outbreakings in sin, to the covering of the offender with shame and confusion, and filling his heart with the deepest contrition and remorse.

2. God is not an indifferent spectator to Ephraim's heart-backsliding, but

* Hof. x. viii.

18 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

is represented as commiserating his wretched case, and reasoning upon what is proper to be done. “ *How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah? How shall I set thee as Zeboim? **” As if he had said, O Ephraim, thou hast provoked me most bitterly by thy sins. It were just in me to give thee up to the spoiler, and to the power of the dragon; to make thee such an example of my vengeance against sin as I made Admah; and set thee up to everlasting infamy as I did Zeboim, seeing thy sinfulness is, in all respects, equal to theirs. But how shall I give thee up, having loved thee freely, with an everlasting love; with a love independant on any obedience of thine; having chosen thee for mine own, how shall I alter my purpose, and change my council concerning thee. I have given thee the promise of life before the world began, and how shall I give thee up? How shall I prove unfaithful, in departing from the word I have spoken, and revoking the promised blessing? No, Ephraim; backsliding as thou art, I will not return to destroy thee †. I will have respect unto my covenant, for I am God, and not man; I will not execute the fierceness of my wrath,

* Hof. xi. 8.

† Hof. xii. 9.

for my heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together, I will surely have mercy, even upon backsliding Ephraim. Thus God establissheth his ancient purpose of grace and mercy towards Ephraim the backslider in heart. Yet,

3. He will give no countenance to his iniquity, nor in any ways connive at his sin. Whilst mercy smiles tenderness and compassion towards his person, infinite holiness frowns upon his backsliding and rebellion. Like a tender father, who has only the good of his son at heart, his bosom glows with ardent love to the child of his loins, whilst his countenance frowns on his obstinacy and rebellion. God, although his love to Ephraim's person be unparalleled, can in no wise become an accomplice in his idolatry.

“ No, saith the Lord *, *I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early.*” q. d. Ephraim is so taken up with his idols, so busy in making altars for them, he has no time nor inclination to think on the rock from whence he was hewn, or to recollect the days of his espousal love, when he could have followed me any where, even in the wilderness, in a land that is not sown. Ephraim is now at

* Hof. v. 15.

case, he can live without his God; his heart is so bent upon his pleasures, so taken up with his hired lovers, that I have no honour to expect from him in his present obstinate and earthly humour. I will therefore hide myself from him, withdraw the comforts of my spirit, and leave him to that darkness which is his choice; leave him to experience what vain things idols are, in the day of his calamity. Nothing but calamity will bring him to his right mind; nothing but famine will bring the wretched prodigal to think of returning to the house of his father. But in the day of affliction, when all help fails, and the vanity of creature-trust is detected, they will seek unto me, even the backslider in heart shall then return unto me, and cry, "My father receive me, for thou wast the guide of my youth."

4. Accordingly we find Ephraim's God declaring*, that, "*for the iniquity of his covetousness he was wroth with him, and smote him; he hid himself and was wroth, and he (Ephraim) went on frowardly in the way of his heart.*" This is exactly answerable to the threatening of his departure already referred to, and from which we see, that although God hides himself from, and is wroth with backsliders in heart, he does

* *Isaiah lvii. 17.*

not at once give them up as incurable. For I was wroth, and smote him, saith the Lord; I hewed him by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth*. So that the backslider in heart has many a wound by the ministry of the word; and the wandering spouse many a blow from the watchmen, and keepers of the walls. This hewing by the prophets, and smiting by the word of the Lord, may sometimes produce a little gleam of momentary goodness; but alas! it is like Ephraim's, as the morning-cloud, or the early dew, neither of which can live out the space of a day. But more commonly these wounds inflicted, irritate and provoke to anger; for, let God hew as much by his prophets, and smite by the words of his mouth as he may, Ephraim will go on frowardly in the way of his own heart, and justify himself in so doing. Hence, one of the first visible signs of heart backsliding, is a dislike to a faithful, searching, practical ministry, and when only smooth things are deemed profitable.

5. The next step which the Almighty taketh with the backslider in heart is awful indeed, enough to make the very heart to tremble. God is withdrawn from him, hath smote him by his word and providence, and all to no purpose, for still he

* Hof. vi. 5.

goes

goes on frowardly in the way of his own heart; therefore he now saith to the watchmen, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone *", hewing will answer no further end; his disease is beyond an ordinary remedy. His heart is ensnared; the disease lies deep within, the vitals are corrupted, and the rank venom has infected the whole soul. Let him alone; tease him no more; give yourselves no farther concern or trouble about him. Why should he be stricken any more, he will revolt more and more? Hence it is, that during the day of Ephraim's rebuke, a spirit of reproof shall naturally, without any art or study of the minister, be discernible in the ministry of the word; and when the Lord says, "Let him alone," that spirit of reproof shall cease, and the ministers shall be released from certain bands, from which this spirit of reproof against Ephraim proceeded. "For the watchmen of Ephraim are with my God†." The prophet, a snare of a fowler in all his ways, and hatred in the house of his God. So that those watchmen who are divinely appointed, come forth under the influence of just such a spirit in their ministry, as it hath pleased God for the time to anoint them with. And even backsliders in heart, however far they are

* Hof. iv. 17. † Hof. ix. 8.

got on their way to Egypt, may have common sense and candour enough to believe, that the minister who is laid under necessity, from bonds upon his own spirit, to preach doctrine, which he knows must needs be offensive to many of his hearers, cannot lead a life the most chearful, nor enjoy a mind exempted from care. Some tenderness is therefore due even to those prophets, by whom God is pleased to hew, and to smite his backsliding Ephraims. We are all ready to condemn *Pasbur* for smiting Jeremiah on the cheek; but from the same spirit as that of *Pasbur*'s, proceeds all resentment against hard sentences from the pulpit.

But delicate Ephraim is like a fair heifer, and cannot bear to be hewed and smitten. Well, let him alone, let him gorge and glut himself with idols; let the backslider in heart be filled with his own way. I shall no longer hold him under restraint. Awful injunction! alarming circumstance!

6. What is now to be expected but Ephraim's final ruin and everlasting overthrow. Still there is mercy with Ephraim's God, and although he changeth his dispensations and mode of operation, his heart is eternally the same, his love passeth not away. In his love he rests forever, and forever delights to shew mercy.

Not-

24 *The BACKSLIDER'S WARNING.*

Notwithstanding Ephraim shall find his God adverse to all his present designs. For the Lord hath taken the backslider in heart out of the hands of prophets and churches, who are now to treat him as a tree, whose branches are withered, and whose root is dried up; he will take the work into his own hand; and to trace his ways towards him after the ceasing of ministerial and church reproof, may not be unprofitable either to me or my reader.

First, I will be as a moth to Ephraim, and to the house of Judah as rottenness *, q. d. Ephraim promiseth himself great increase from his unwearied and covetous pursuit of the world. He expects great peace, pleasure and delight to arise from accumulated wealth. But I will confound his measures, and dissolve his schemes in air. I will be as a moth in his substance, so that he shall not prosper. I will bewilder him in his connections, so that his very idols shall become his grief, seeing they have been his snare. To this, if I mistake not, may be attributed many of the great losses in trade, which some are tried with, and an insensible waste of substance with which others are visited. What is this, but the Almighty being a moth to them as he was to Ephraim? But being a moth is not

* Hof. v. xii.

all that is threatened against backsliding Ephraim; for saith the Lord,

2. I will be as a lion unto Ephraim, and as a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will take away, and none shall rescue *. If a moth in his substance is not sufficient to reclaim him, the Lord will become a lion in his family, to rend and tear away his dearest delights and choicest comforts. Whatever is nearest in nature, and likely to strike the heart with the most painful sensations and wringing anguish, shall be torn away, when God ariseth terribly to shake his dwelling. Now a darling child, for whom was great diligence in providing, is torn away, and nothing can atone for its forfeited life, forfeited by its doating parent. A beloved wife is rent from the dear embrace of the husband. One idol falls, and is shattered to shivers on this hand, and another on that, till all the altars, which Ephraim has been long making, are laid into one common heap of desolation. And admitting that such bereaving dispensations should not take place, God has many ways of becoming as a lion to Ephraim, and rending his creature-comfort to pieces. Have we never seen a beloved wife, who has been the means of drawing off the husband's heart from God,

* Hof. v. 14.

26 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

by an overfond attachment to her, spared on purpose to become his most weighty Cross? Have we never seen a child, the object of the parents too warm affection and solicitude; to procure a fortune for whom every power was exerted, and religion itself must give way, spared, to be the undoer of family peace, and the breaker of his parents spirits.

The holy God hath promised in such a case, that “he will meet the backslider as a bear bereft of her whelps—That he will rend the caul of his heart; that he will devour them like a lion; that the wild beast of the forest shall tear them*.” I say promised, because the judgments specified are denounced in the greatest mercy to ungrateful backsliders. Were not the caul of the heart rent, or in other words, the callous disposition removed, how should conviction enter, and how should the heart be broken for sin, or the eye be lifted up to a pierced Saviour. When their comforts are devoured in providence, as a lion devours his prey, they will begin to enquire after God, who was the guide of their youth: when the wild beast of the forest shall tear them with his accusations and snares, they will flee for refuge to the hope set before them in the gospel, and seek for shelter in the everlasting covenant.

* Hof. xiii. 8.

3. When-

3. Whenever the rebuke shall come, and God, as a lion, tears the backslider's comfort to pieces; "*Ephraim shall be dumb in the day of Rebuke?*" He shall have nothing to charge upon the divine conduct. He must be silent, however *oppressed and broken in judgment*; however grievous his wounds and sore his sickness; convinced that all these evils he hath brought upon himself. Estranged from the throne of Grace, *he is like a silly dove without heart**; he has not an heart to flee to God for relief. Therefore it is said †, "*When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent unto king Jareb for help.*" But alas! when the Lord riseth up to make waste, who shall deliver? Who is king *Jareb*, that he should counteract omnipotence? And how deplorable is the state of that soul which is shut out, as it were, from God in the day of his calamity, by the blindness and stupidity which his backsliding has brought upon him?

But now the Lord having stretched forth his hand in a stripping and exposing way against Ephraim, he will not turn it back till it hath accomplished his deliverance. We may therefore,

* Hof. vii. 11.

† Hof. v. 13.

IV. Attend to the humbled state of the backslider in his restoration. Ephraim being let alone, and permitted to follow the idols to which he was joined; having his heart-backslidings punished by outward sins, which have brought shame upon him; being smote and wounded by the word and providence; God being become to him as a *moth* in his substance, a lion in his every way; and proving the skill of king Jareb to be but ignorance, filled with his own way, and surfeited with idols, he now lothes them as much as heretofore he loved them. "*What have I any more to do with idols*?*" One would have thought once, to have seen busy Ephraim making his altars to sin, that he would never have been tired of his idols; but now we find him quite sick of them; the backslider in heart is altogether filled with his own way. But how this came to pass is a matter of pertinent enquiry; seeing he has not lately been hewed by the prophets, nor smitten by the word of the Lord.

The ground of this alteration is accounted for *Isaiah* lvii. 17. "*For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid me and was wroth, and he went on frowardly in the way of his heart; I have seen his ways and will heal him.*" It was not

* *Hos.* xiv. 8.

God's

God's being angry with Ephraim, that could reclaim him from walking frowardly in the way of his own heart; it was not hewing him by the prophets, nor smiting him by the word of his mouth, that could make Ephraim sick of his idols. I have seen his ways, I have left him till he is surfeited with them; I myself will heal him, and restore comforts to him; for I will surely have mercy upon Ephraim, as a pleasant child and the son of my affection.

The divine comforter having taken the work into his own hand, we soon find Ephraim another man, tired of all his idols, flinging them away from him. *What have I any more to do with idols? What good have I ever reaped from them? What benefit can I obtain by following them? Unhappy is he who is left to fill himself with his own way.* Then it is that poor Ephraim speaks tremblingly, under a sense of most grievous heart-backslidings, and his awful practical departure from God. Ephraim is no longer like a fair heifer that loveth to tread out the corn; but is now under a very humbling sense of the most aggravated guilt and conscious rebellion. He has done with Assyria, *Assur shall not save us*; with Egypt, *for we will not ride upon horses*; with idols of every name, *for we will not say any more to the works of our own hands,*

hands, ye are our Gods *. Seeing that idols have been the ruin of his comforts, and the bane of his happiness, his soul now lothes them with the most perfect abhorrence. What have I to do with them? I who have been taught by God himself to go; I whom he condescended to lead by the arm, and to guard in my tottering infancy; What have I to do with *idols*, seeing I have the living God to adore?

2. It is now that Ephraim bemoans himself, and with regret surveys his past conduct; every altar which he had made unto sin, lies with an heavy weight upon his conscience; and every idol strikes him through with horror. “*Surely I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself, thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke, turn thou me, and I shall be turned, for thou art the Lord my God. Surely after I was turned I repented; and after I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth* †. Ephraim’s glory is now in the dust, his daughters of music are brought low, his beauty is faded as the shaken leaf, and the iniquity of his heels compasseth him about. He begins now to come to himself, and to see that the hand of God is upon him.

* Hof. xiv. 3. † Jer. xxxi. 18, 19.

Thou

Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised; I feel thy hand and confess thy power, but alas, thy chastisements have not produced the desired effect. So stupid and ignorant was I, I was as a beast before thee; I felt thy rod, but I received not correction. As untractable as an unbroken bullock, untaught, unaccustomed to the yoke. I was chastised, and yet froward, thoughtless and insensible of danger, as that animal when led to the slaughter-house. Now the backslider in heart begins to look to a pierced Saviour, and mourn in bitterness, as one that mourns for an only son, Now he hath no pleasure in all the things of which he is ashamed: the very remembrance of his backslidings is bitterness to him.

Filled with his own way; fallen by his iniquity; ashamed and confounded amidst his reproach; every sandy foundation sapped; every lying refuge swept away; what must the poor backsliding Ephraim do? Whither must he flee for relief? To whom shall he go; on whom shall he call for help? Here he sits and bemoans his wretchedness and stupidity, and perhaps greatly questioning, whether there is yet mercy remains with the Highest for him; or if it is possible, that such a criminal may obtain pardon.

But

32 The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.

But he hears ; in a transporting hour he hears the voice of mercy publishing the gracious invitation, and calling of him by name *. *Return thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord, and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you ; for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep mine anger for ever.* How pleasant this invitation to the poor backslider, trembling under the weight of his own ingratitude ? But still, to remove all doubts from Ephraim's bosom, the invitation is repeated yet in stronger terms †. *Turn, O backsliding children, for I am married unto you.* Amazing grace ! Astonishing mercy ! That Ephraim should be owned as a child, a pleasant child, even after all his backslidings ! Yet so it is expressly declared ‡, *Ephraim, my dear Son, a pleasant child ; for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still.* Yea, as if the owning of Ephraim for a son were not sufficient to encourage the trembling backslider to look up ; a nearer, the nearest of all, even a conjugal relation is pointed out as subsisting. “ *Return, for I am married to you ;*” I rest in my love, and hate putting away, notwithstanding ye have dealt very treacherously with me.

* Jer. iii. 12. † Jer. v. 14. ‡ Jer. xxxi. 20.

But

But alas! how can such a sinner return to him, such a backslider hope for favour? I am ashamed of my rags and nakedness; helpless by reason of my wounds and broken bones. Gladly would I venture, yet I dread to approach his seat. The voice of mercy again is heard, a third time repeating the encouraging word, "*return ye backsliding children, I will heal your backslidings.*" This wins the heart, attracts the soul to the way of his steps. "*Behold we come unto thee.*" Inspires the soul with returning confidence. "*For thou art the Lord our God *.*"

How gracious, kind and condescending is our God, who knowing, that whatever encouragement might have been given to sinners, the vilest of sinners in general, it would not have reached the poor backslider's case, nor yielded comfort to a bemoaning Ephraim, tenderly calls *them* by name, *Backsliders*; return to me, ye *backsliders*, &c. Thus might the backslider have reasoned. "What if rest is proclaimed to the weary, liberty to the captives, healing to the sick, and pardon to the condemned? What is this to a backslider in heart; a revolting rebel; an apostate? What is it all to a willful rebel; a sinner daringly obstinate; an apostate who has crucified again.

* Jer. iii.

the

But

34 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

the Lord Jesus Christ to himself; trampled on the blood of the covenant; and sinned so grievously after such illuminations? Therefore what are they all to me? But God to make his system of grace compleat, is pleased to call the backslider in heart by his own proper name, and openly avow his relation to him, notwithstanding all his treachery and baseness.

When Jesus sent a general message to his disciples, informing them of his resurrection, and mentioneth them in the gross, as a collective body, "tell my disciples," he was graciously pleased to send a *special* message to poor fallen Peter, whom he tenderly mentions by name, "*tell Peter.*" Amazing tenderness and love to a fallen disciple, whose wounded spirit stood in need of a special cordial; whose broken heart had occasion for the balsam of life. Even so the kind, the blessed news of life and peace, through the blood of the Cross, is published to sinners in general; but there is a special message of love sent to the poor backslider in person and by name: and yet I must account this same backslider, of all others, to be the very vilest and hell-deserving sinner.

This special invitation given to the backslider, filled with his own ways, and lamenting his frowardness and rebellion, brings

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brings him to resolve upon returning.
"Come and let us return to the Lord, for we have fallen by our iniquity. He hath torn us as a lion in our way, because of our perverseness; and he will heal us, because of his own mercy; for in him the fatherless, the helpless, the outcasts and perishing find relief. He hath smitten us by his providence, and wounded us by the words of his mouth, but he will bind us up. He only is a physician to the wounded spirit; with him only is the sovereign balsam that can give life and vigour to the dying heart. Behold we come to thee, for thou art the Lord our God."

But how, alas, shall guilty Ephraim, the backslider in heart, return to the Lord? With what shall he procure admittance into his favour? How shall he be justified with God? *Wherewithal shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ** No Ephraim, no, this is not the way of peace. *He will take no bullock out of thy house, nor be-goat out of thy fold; for every beast of*

* Mich. vi. 6, 7.

36 The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.

*the forest is his, and the cattle on a thousand hills. If he were hungry he would not tell thee, for the earth and all its fulness is his. Will thy God eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? **

Thy God himself; God against whom thou hast grievously sinned, kindly condescends to put thee on a more acceptable, and less expensive way †. *Take with you words, and turn to the Lord; say to him, take away all iniquity, receive us graciously, so will we render to thee the calves of our lips.* Take with you words, the words of his gracious invitation, and promise to backsliders such as thyself. Say unto him, *take away all iniquity*, according to thine own promise, for I cannot subdue my sinfulness. Take with you words of confession. The returning prodigal took with him those words, that he might make peace with his offended Father ‡. *“ I will arise, said he, and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee. I am no more worthy to be called thy Son.”* Go thou and do so likewise ||. *Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God, and hast not obeyed my voice, saith the Lord.*

* Psal. l. 9, 10, 12, 13.

† Luke xv. 18, 19.

‡ Hos. xiv. 2.

|| Jer. iii. 13.

Ephraim's

Ephraim's trembling voice and faltering speech indicates his approaching exaltation. His idols are cast off; the prodigal hath forsaken the flies of the swine, and now returns to his long forsaken father; sometimes encouraging an hope of acceptance, at others overwhelmed with despondency and fear. With dull and heavy pace, with a cloudy and dejected countenance, he passeth on as his feebleness will suffer him. When the distraction of his mind will let him, meditating on, how he may lay himself low enough at the feet of his father; when, to his astonishment and confusion, he sees his tender father running up to meet, and in an extacy of joy embracing and caressing him with all the ardour of paternal affection. "What, Ephraim, my dear son! Ephraim, my pleasant child! I do earnestly remember thee still, my son! My bowels are troubled for thy distressing circumstances; but I will surely have mercy on thee, saith the LORD.* I will heal thy backslidings; I will love thee freely, for mine anger is turned away from thee†.

Gratitude now swells the bosom of the overjoyed prodigal; Ephraim restored to the embraces of his God, without any upbraiding for his past irregularities and folly, can no longer be silent in the praises

* Jer. xxxi. 20.

† Hos. xiv. 4.

33 *The BACKSLIDERS WARNING.*

of grace. O, my God! I will praise thee; for although thou wast angry with me, and smotest me, thine anger is now turned away, and thou comfortest me*.

Paternal affection cannot stifle its ardour. It must discover itself in fresh caresses of the newly returned son. "Take away these filthy garments which deform my child; put upon him the best robe, put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. Bring hither the fatted calf and kill; and let us eat and be merry. For this my son Ephraim, whom you all gave up as dead, is now returned from his idols to the house of his father; he who was once lost to a sense of shame, is now found in the way of duty and privilege†. Oh Ephraim, my son, I will be as the dew unto thee; thou shalt yet grow as the lilly, and spread forth thy roots as Lebanon. I will cause thy branches to spread, thy beauty to become as the olive-tree, and thy smell as Lebanon. Thou shalt revive as the corn, and grow as the vine, and thy scent shall be as the wine of Lebanon.

To conclude, I am aware that freewillers, enemies to the grace of Christ, will by no means relish the manner in which I have handled this subject; supposing that threat-

* Isaiah xii. 1. † Luke xv. compared with Hos.
xv.

enings of eternal damnation are necessary to awe the believer into a continuance of well-doing. But I would ask every serious person, whether he is as much affected by threatenings of that nature, as he is from the meer apprehension of being left to fall into sin, to the wounding of his own soul, and dishonour of religion? And if the latter is found to be the case, I hope I shall be justified in handling the subject just as it lies before me in scripture.

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